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ABSTRACT

This document is based upon Charles A. Ratliff's perspective on California community college governance. It was originally published in the journal, "Insight Into Student Services" in May 2003. Mr. Ratliff discusses the historical emergence of the California community college as a system and the major external pressures that have been placed upon the colleges in recent decades. The author explains in detail how external pressures on community colleges have created a need for change and then makes certain observations and recommendations. The recommendations include giving faculty the responsibility for student academic outcomes and the authority to shape academic policies and procedures that guide teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, student service professionals should be responsible for non-cognitive development of students and assigned authority to shape college support services and experiences that have an impact on desired outcomes. The author concludes by saying that the California community colleges should continue its evolution to a unified system of postsecondary education and everyone (colleges, district boards, state board, and legislatures) should refocus their attention and energies on how to best serve all students and help promote their ability to learn continuously throughout their lives. (MZ)

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Perspectives on California Community College Governance

Charles A. Ratliff, Ph.D.

Synopsis

The 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education firmly established community colleges as an integral cornerstone of California's public postsecondary education sector. But, it did not clearly establish governance responsibility. On one hand, the state Board of Governors cannot truthfully claim to be the official spokesperson for the community colleges. On the other, the authority of local boards was compromised by the passage of Proposition 13. This thoughtful article provides an historical overview of how this situation evolved and the recommendations that have emerged from various groups over the years.

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Article

I confess to feeling both appreciation and trepidation in response to the invitation to comment about governance within the California Community Colleges. There is such a high level of investment in maintaining current governance relationships that any thought of change elicits a visceral opposition. Nonetheless, I have agreed to share various perspectives on governance within the California Community College system, including those I have entertained at the state level. I do so with the hope of stimulating thoughtful reflection on the concept of governance and the ways in which governance contributes to meeting the dual purposes of serving the needs of the state and the needs of local communities within the state.

I begin my remarks with a quick review of the evolution of community colleges over time and then comment briefly on growing concerns about governance that have motivated consideration of change.

Emergence of California's Community Colleges as a System

The California Community Colleges, taken aggregately, represent the largest system of public postsecondary education in the world. Nearly two million students a year are served through the offerings of 108 colleges and additional off-campus sites, organized into 72 districts. Each of these districts is governed by locally-elected boards of trustees. The adoption of the 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education firmly established the community colleges as an integral cornerstone of

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California's public postsecondary education sector.

Since 1908, California's community colleges have evolved from extensions of high schools to semi-autonomous junior colleges, emphasizing transfer and vocational courses, to more comprehensive community colleges offering broad educational opportunities that meet local, regional, and state needs. This evolution also explains why the community colleges are the least centralized of the state's public systems of postsecondary education.

Prior to adoption of the 1960 Master Plan, the then junior colleges were already assuming many of the vestiges of postsecondary education institutions but were firmly and legally part of the public school system. The colleges were administered by the state Board of Education, which also had responsibility for public schools and state colleges. Because of this enormous range of responsibility, the Board provided primarily ministerial functions on behalf of the colleges, and the legislature tended to legislate directly for local districts.

Governance

Though the 1960 Master Plan redefined the junior colleges as part of postsecondary education, it did not establish a statewide governing board for the junior colleges as it did for the state colleges. That step did not occur until 1967 when the legislature and governor created a Board of Governors to provide greater attention to and policy direction for the colleges. The impact of this change was slight at the local level through the middle 1970's, largely because of strong enrollment growth and generous funding. It is important to note that although the legislature gave broad responsibilities to the Board of Governors, it left intact all existing education code assigning powers to local boards and failed to include the word governance in the description of the responsibilities and authority assigned to the Board of Governors.

Major External Pressures

Between 1976 and 1986, over 1,750 Education Code provisions affecting community colleges were added, amended, or repealed, which provides an example of the extent to which operations of community colleges were, and continue to be, prescribed and managed by statute rather than decisions of locally elected boards.

The local community college districts were also negatively affected by California's voters. Driven by a perception that legislators were doing little to protect home owners from excessive property taxes, voters approved Proposition 13 in 1978. A constitutional amendment, Proposition 13 limited growth in property taxes and dramatically reduced local revenue available to support local schools and community colleges. It also effectively removed the ability of local college districts to levy taxes to support education and training opportunities needed/demanded by residents of their service areas. As a result, much of the responsibility for funding community college operations shifted from local districts to the state. The unintended outcome of Proposition 13's implementation undercut one of the major reasons for local boards: they could neither determine the amount

of funds available to support college operations nor the principle uses to which those funds could be put.

Another outcome that has its roots in the implementation of Proposition 13 is the authorization of "freeflow" enrollment – the ability of students to enroll in any community college offering educational opportunities that met their needs, without regard for district boundaries. Since the majority of funding for college operations flowed from the state, education code was modified to reflect that fact. This placed local boards in the awkward position of making decisions that no longer affected only the voters of the districts they served. When coupled with the previously described loss of taxing authority, Proposition 13 placed local boards in a position of determining policies that affected students who neither resided nor paid taxes in the local district.

The Context for Change

This brief historical summary, though far from comprehensive, is important because it helps explain the context within which policy pundits at the state level view the community colleges and it various representatives. It also highlights the challenges that exist for the colleges at both the local and state level.

A careful read of the 1960 Master Plan indicates a legislative intent to create a state system of community colleges that, when fully built out, would provide access to college for every Californian who desired and could benefit from it. And that access would be within a 30-minute commute. It did not envision the creation of multiple community college systems.

The growth of prescriptive language in the education and administrative codes have prompted some researchers to observe that the legislature serves as a sort of "super board" for the community colleges. Through enactment of legislation they decide everything from fees to workforce composition to which groups must be included in consultations with local governing boards and the state BOG. While some of this prescriptiveness might be understandable as the community colleges began the transition from an extended high school environment to the culture of postsecondary education, there are serious questions about the extent to which such detailed legislative direction continues to be needed or even helpful. A continued reliance on legislative direction has fostered continuous tension and distrust between local boards – which actively lobby legislators to accrue the resources needed for their districts – and the state BOG who frequently finds its representation of community college needs is not perfectly aligned with what districts solicit. Moreover, the state BOG has reluctantly accepted the fact that it is in a weak negotiating position because it cannot truthfully claim to be the official spokesperson for the community colleges.

Mild to severe economic constraints in the state in each of the last three decades (1980s, 1990s, and currently) have prompted serious examinations of educational expenditures and revenue needs. Within the community colleges, economic pressures directly contributed to the imposition of mandatory fees, experimentation with differential fees, increasing use of part-time faculty, and workforce reductions

in areas vital to student support and achievement. It also prompted examination of the costs associated with what some have called a loose confederation of districts vs. a unified system of colleges.

A Unified State System

A study completed by the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC report 98-09 "Toward a Unified State System), provides a more detailed description of governance issues I have summarized in the foregoing sections. Some of the questions considered in that report include the following:

- What are the costs associated with maintenance of local boards of trustees?
- What is the feasibility of consolidating of single college districts to reduce administrative expenditures that do not support teaching and learning activities?
- If local boards were eliminated, what is the estimated savings that could be redirected to support enrollment growth, teaching, and learning?

While the answers to these and other questions were difficult to come by, the conclusions of CPEC were biased by its fundamental premise that the community colleges should be a unified system.

A Bi-level System

A report issued by the California Citizens Commission on Higher Education (Toward a State of Learning, March 1999) was influenced by a different bias: that the community college governance structure should reflect its state-local nature by adoption of a 2-level governance structure. Major recommendations contained in that report included:

- Eliminate elected district boards
- Replace district boards with appointed Governance Councils at each college
- Strengthen the state board and charge it with responsibility for establishing and maintaining statewide standards for programs of statewide importance
- Delete all existing education code provisions pertaining to the California Community Colleges and replace with a concise non-regulatory framework oriented towards expectations and outcomes, not mandates.
- Implement statewide collective bargaining or require the state board to adopt general standards for contracts at each college and authorize them to reject contracts that to not conform to these standards.

Concluding observations and remarks

My own bias with respect to governance in the community college is shaped by my many years of administrative experiences in the student services area and my experiences in statewide policy arenas. I am uncompromising in my belief that the true measure of quality in our educational institutions is evidence that student needs are being met and they are achieving educational goals they have accepted or set for themselves. I am equally convinced that the people in the best position to

provide such evidence are classroom teachers. Administrative and policy decisions that directly affect the teaching and learning experiences of colleges, as well as academic standards, are improved significantly by collaboration and consultation with instructional faculty. In fact, I would argue that development and modification of academic standards should not be implemented without such input.

However, proper governance of community colleges involves more than just academic matters. It also incorporates student support services, physical facilities, fiscal management, and general administrative leadership. For each of these areas there is a body of experts whose advice should be sought as policy decisions are made. Ultimately the accountability for how all aspects of college operations work to effectively serve students and respond to institutional missions resides with the governing board, whether one's focus is at the local or state level.

The important aspects of effective governance involve clear description of responsibility, delegated authority aligned to the responsibility assigned to each participating entity, and regular review and evaluation of outcomes. Think in terms of "nested" relationships and responsibilities. Faculty should be responsible for student academic outcomes and should be assigned authority to shape academic policies and procedures that guide teaching and learning experiences. Student service professionals should be responsible for non-cognitive development of students and assigned authority to shape college support services and experiences that have an impact on desired outcomes. Each of these in turn has a responsibility to report needs and resource utilization to administrators and governing boards, who have a responsibility to meet the aggregate needs of the college and/or district and should have authority to take such actions as needed to meet their respective responsibilities. This "nested" approach to governance extends upward so that the state BOG has a responsibility to meet the needs of the entire system of community colleges and should have the authority to take whatever actions are necessary to carry out its responsibilities. Neither level of player should have, or assume, the authority to dictate the actions of a group with a different body of expertise or a higher level of responsibility.

My bias towards a nested approach to governance leads to the conclusion that local governing boards continue to be valuable, if not essential to effective delivery of services to students. There is no way that legislators in Sacramento can be as intimately familiar with the needs of California's many communities as are local boards. Decisions on how best to serve all students is best made locally. At the same time, local districts and constituent groups cannot continue to insist on legislative mandates to define relationships with each other and with the Board of Governors. Relationships of respect and trust cannot prosper in an environment of forced compliance.

The California Community College system must continue its evolution to a unified system of postsecondary education and support a single "voice" in the state's budget and policy arena. Local districts must become comfortable with significantly less statutory prescription of how they should operate the colleges under their jurisdiction. And everyone – colleges, district boards, state board, and legislators – must refocus their attention and energies on how best to serve all students, and promote their ability to learn over a lifetime.

The Author

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Charles A. Ratliff has more than 30 years experience in education as a counselor and advisor in secondary schools, a counselor and administrator at the university level and, more recently, as a policy analyst and planner for postsecondary education in California. He obtained his baccalaureate degree in Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, his Master's degree in Counseling & Educational Psychology at California State University, Hayward, and his doctorate in the Administration of Higher Education & Policy Analysis at UC Berkeley.

Currently, Dr. Ratliff serves as a senior consultant to the Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education. In this role, he has joint responsibility for crafting a new Master Plan for developing a cohesive education system in California that sustains high quality teaching and learning opportunities for Californians, reduces undesirable competition, and that is flexible enough to accommodate large future enrollment demand. Prior to this position, Dr. Ratliff served as the Chief Deputy Director for the California Postsecondary Education Commission for seven years, with primary responsibility for agency operations, workplan development, budget management, and strategic planning activities of the Commission. The Commission is the state agency with responsibility for long-range planning and coordination of 137 public colleges and universities, 164 regionally accredited independent colleges and universities, and nearly 2,400 private vocational schools and degree-granting institutions, serving more than two million students.

Previously, Dr. Ratliff has served as the Director of an Upward Bound Program at California State University, Long Beach; Director of the Educational Opportunity Program and Director of Student Academic Services at California State University, Hayward, and as an academic senator in two state universities. Dr. Ratliff has and continues to be recognized for his leadership and contributions to programs designed to assist disadvantaged youth. He is noted for having developed model high school and college programs that effectively elevate the educational aspirations of disadvantaged youth while assisting them in acquiring the academic skills needed to successfully achieve those aspirations. He also is one of the co-founders of the Western Association of Educational Opportunity Programs (WESTOP), a regional association established to represent the interest of low-income and disadvantaged families in five western states.

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